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FOR 1898-99.

CHAPTER XXX.

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CHAPTER XXX.

WILLIAM PRESTON JOHNSTON'S WORK FOR A NEW SOUTH.[1]

By Rev. A. D. Mayo, A. M., LL. D.

No school year begins as the year before it evolved to its triumphant ending. One change in the superintendency of the public-school system of an American city may become the most potent factor in the educational development of that community for a generation to come. The death of President William Preston Johnston, of Tulane University, New Orleans, La., at the home of his daughter in Lexington, Ky., on July 17, was an event of so much public importance, apart from a wide personal acquaintance, that for the coming few months the attention of the better-informed educational public of the whole country will be directed to that city. It is not too much to say that any arrest of the educational policy represented by President Johnston would just now be a greater calamity to that city and State, and, indirectly but surely, to the whole Southwest, than any political action of the entire group of States included in this section.

William Preston Johnston was born in Kentucky, the son of Gen. Albert Sidney Johnston, in 1831. After a miscellaneous preparatory schooling at home, he graduated at Yale, studied law at Louisville, and, in 1862, at the age of 31, became aid-de-camp of President Davis till the close of the civil war. After several months of confinement as a political prisoner, he was called, in 1867, by General, then President, R. E. Lee, to the chair of English literature in Washington and Lee University in Virginia. During this period he wrote the life of his father. In 1880 he was called to the presidency of the Louisiana State University at Baton Rouge, where he remained until his final position was found as president of Tulane University in New Orleans in 1884.

Here, first, during the memorable fifteen years of the development of this remarkable seat of learning, the young colonel, professor, and temporary president of a demoralized State university attained a national reputation, beyond question, with the exception of his friend, Dr. J. L. M. Curry, the most notable of the new educational leaders of the South. What men like the late Bishop Haygood and Dr. Curry have done as missionaries at large in the great development of the American system of universal education during the past thirty years, President Johnston, in a work almost exclusively local, but of enduring value and increasing reputation, has achieved by the planting and nurture, in the very heart of the old South, under the most embarrassing circumstances, of the group of schools now included under the general title, Tulane University. With no disposition to depreciate the excellent work now being done in several of the more progressive colleges and universities in these sixteen States, we have no hesitation in declaring that in what it now is, what it represents, and what it can be made in the near future, this institution stands for an educational policy that signifies more to the future of those States than everything that has been written and said concerning Southern affairs since its establishment in 1884.

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[1] From the Boston Evening Transcript, August 23, 1899.

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The two men who seem to have been born and educated as the permanent representatives of the new education of the Southern people, including both races and all classes, were S. C. Armstrong and William Preston Johnston. Both were of New England descent and graduates of New England colleges. Both were specially trained in their youth, in the most characteristic circles, for the great work of their future. Both were engaged in the civil war, in positions especially valuable for wide observation and in intimate relations with the group of remarkable men that surrounded Lincoln and Davis. Neither of them would probably be regarded by the experts a great schoolmaster; yet both were, in the best sense of the word, educational statesmen, fit associates of Mann, Barnard, Winthrop, Haygood, Curry, and the only man yet developed from the colored race worthy of such designation, Mr. Booker Washington. They both were given time to plant the new departure so firmly in Southern soil that Johnston could say on his deathbed, like Armstrong, that he was no longer a necessity in the institution which owed its existence and character essentially to his great personality.

Armstrong, at Hampton, Va., solved the question of the true education of the negro—the question on which the whole future of the South depends—so completely that the Southern educational public and every Southern State have organized the elementary, secondary, industrial, and higher education for their 8,000,000 colored people on the Hampton plan; and, within the coming twenty years, if not earlier, the entire missionary and educational work in our new colonial possessions will be pitched on the Hampton keynote.

In a way less exposed to national observation—indeed, perhaps even now not appreciated in many of the "educational centers" of the North—President Johnston, in the very heart of the most intensely southern portion of the South, like Dr. Curry personally and by training a Southerner of the Southerners, in fifteen years has built up an institution that in the honesty and thorough excellence of all its instruction is not the inferior of any school of the higher education in the country. And, beyond this, in its ideal of organization, methods of college discipline, adaptation to the most embarrassing variety of population in a city and State whose previous experiments in education had been little more than a series of brilliant failures, Tulane University to-day represents more completely the imperative Southern necessity of the broadest education and the most comprehensive method of dealing with this necessity of any school south of Mason and Dixon's line. Indeed, to find its companion work in the North would be difficult. Perhaps the new University of Chicago is the only eminent representative of the same policy of adaptation in the Northern States.

When President Johnston came to Louisiana, in 1880, as president of the State University, he found the educational system in the midst of what might be called a struggle for existence. The university at Baton Rouge was without funds, in a hired house, with 39 students. The fifteen years of fearful political agitation since the days of '65 had made the proper development of the new public-school system almost an impossibility. In New Orleans the common school was practically in a state of siege, with the teachers unpaid and the educational public greatly discouraged. The one thoroughly live spot in city and State seemed to be the University of Louisiana, an excellent collegiate school in New Orleans, doing more work on its moderate income of $10,000 a year than any similar institution in the State. The gift of Paul Tulane of a great block of real estate for the founding of a college for white youth could easily have been disposed of after the method by which every previous donation in Louisiana had been robbed of its vitality, or the college established by it could have easily added another to the long roll of institutions for all races and both sexes which during the past century have played fast and loose with the highest educational titles, with varied results.

The coming of President Johnston at the age of 53, in the full development of his

magnetic and conservative manhood, with his training for the past twenty-five years, was the most pronounced new departure in the higher education in the Southwest. Under the leadership of Dr. Sears and the Peabody education board of trustees, backed by the progressive section of the Southern educational public, the common-school system for the whole people had been inaugurated in every State and was literally waiting, with great expectation, for the action of Congress on the Blair bill for national aid to education. But it can truly be said that in 1880 the American system at best had only effected a lodgment in the Southwest. In this entire group of five States there were not a dozen good free high schools for white pupils, probably not twenty graded school systems; and the State universities, either ruined by the war or not yet established, had before them a battle for life with the old established system of ecclesiastical denominational education, still in possession of the ground. In Louisiana the problem was complicated by the obstinate social and religious distinctions which, from the beginning had successively met and almost overthrown every attempt to plant the American system even for the white race. Happily for the new experiment, the new-come president found himself supported by the most intelligent, resolute, and tactful board of trustees in the South, with Hon. Randall Gibson as its chairman, all personal friends, and with such wise confidence in their leader that he was virtually given a free hand.

The record of the great work of President Johnston and his excellent faculties of Tulane, in both its departments for men and women, requires more than the allotted columns of a metropolitan daily. But in brief, the different steps may be noted—

1. The new president faced the situation with a courage that in a weaker man would have been professional destruction. He simply told the people that a State, full of so-called "colleges," had not in it the material for a proper university, and that the only hope of one was the vital connection of Tulane with every live element of popular education in the Commonwealth. In the face of the most relentless ecclesiasticism he planted Tulane on the broad American platform of the State university in its character-training of youth of all sorts and conditions of theological beliefs. In a State which had just emancipated a majority of its people from chattel slavery, he announced that every boy entering Tulane must take off his coat and fight it out on the manual-training line of mechanics, and sent to Boston for a group of experts in this direction. By a wise stroke he utilized the admirable school known as the University of Louisiana, with its corps of accomplished teachers, as the preparatory training school for his collegiate and university departments.

2. It was soon found that Tulane was to be no hospital for educational invalids, worn-out veterans, and impecunious social celebrities. The new president had already, in the academical, medical, and legal schools, probably the ablest corps of instructors gathered around any Southern institution of learning; the majority young men of promise, one of whom has already graduated to the presidency of a great State university, representing every section of the country with up-to-date educational ideals. A most important department, really the outcome of the industrial training, was the organization within and without the university of a proper school of ornamental design; on the one hand attracting the most accomplished women, and on the other extending a friendly right hand to the mechanical and operative class of the city, recognizing the fact that the final office of New Orleans is to become a great center of ornamental manufacturing industry for the Southwest. In every position in this extended scheme was found an expert, insisting on a thorough dealing with the work in hand.

3. The president displayed the qualities of the true educational statesman in avoiding all controversy and provoking no unfriendly criticism from the regulation college or university anywhere. In the line of the famous maxim of Napoleon, "In any new departure, let the leaders alone and go direct to the people," for the first time in Southern educational history a university president faced right about and,

with neither apology nor explanation, harnessed Tulane to every vital agency of universal education in Louisiana and the Southwest. He was the soul of the Louisiana Education Society, that, in the ten years of its activity, gathered the friends of the common school in the city of New Orleans into a powerful organization, which, in the ten years of its activity, repulsed the assault of its enemies, woke up its friends in city and State, and laid the broad foundation of what is now one of the most hopeful of the public-school organizations of the Southwest. Along with this he placed the entire university at the disposal of the common-school teachers and educational public, through a system of free public lectures by his faculty and eminent gentlemen from the whole country, during one whole season supporting a campaign of education that reached almost every considerable village in the State. He was always ready to answer the call to speak anywhere, through several months in company with the author of this paper, meeting the workingmen of both races in their labor unions in New Orleans. Indeed, in this way the city teachers of New Orleans for several years received from Tulane University a course of instruction equivalent to a normal school of the broadest and highest grade. He began at once the development of the free public library which has grown into the present free library of the city. By a system of free scholarships from all the parishes or counties of the State, and others offered for competition in the leading schools, he built up a constituency which can not be diverted while Tulane retains its present ascendence. By a fortunate early investment in school buildings in the city, with an addition to the original endowment, the university has now been enabled to house itself in an admirable situation adjoining Audubon Park, while the medical department has been favored in a similar way in town. The time will come, with the inevitable coming prosperity of the city, when additional endowments will furnish the necessary funds for the complete development that always haunted the mind and burdened the heart of its great president.

4. But perhaps the most characteristic feature in this almost romantic story of Tulane is its remarkable success in handling the delicate subject of the higher education of woman. Although no part of the country can show a more enthusiastic group of young women, often longing in vain for the means of obtaining but no less praying for the best in the higher education, up to ten years ago the South had been slow to answer the call. There has, indeed, been a gratifying advancement in the character of the so-called female colleges of the section, many of which are becoming valuable secondary schools for women with an upper grade college attachment. A few of the State universities have opened their doors to girls; and six of these States have established the free normal and industrial college for white girls, while every Southern State has now a State normal school. But the most complete institution of the higher education for women is doubtless the Sophia Newcomb College—the proper woman's department of Tulane University. Under the masterly administration of President B. V. B. Dixon . . . . . the Sophia Newcomb College has grown in ten short years into a genuine companionship with Tulane. By its conditions of admission it has sensibly lifted up the entire system of female seminaries in the city and State. Its new buildings, with their furnishings, are the most attractive spectacle in the new side of New Orleans. Aiming at thoroughness in all its work, it has in its president one of the most competent representatives of the higher educational philosophy; and it already has become a power in the cultivation of the literary and artistic life of New Orleans and the Southwest. Its graduates are admitted on equal terms to all the privileges of the university.

This great work, which still remains far short of its own complete development at home, but in the future is to make a radical change in the entire organization of the secondary and higher education through the South, is a good illustration of the imperative need of first-class leadership. No State, perhaps, in this section had a larger number of broad-minded and well-disposed people for such work than Loui-

siana fifteen years ago. Tulane University is the result of the best thought of this group of people, under the fit leadership of President Johnston. Indeed, in his state of failing health, which for ten years made him almost an invalid, it would have been impossible even for him to have done his work without the hearty cooperation of trustees, faculty, and a resolute educational public. Randall Gibson used to say that he "never knew a man of finer fiber than President Johnston." It was only by the power of a marvelous personality, in which an indomitable will was harnessed to a childlike Christian faith, a rare social charm, and a magnetic quality of leadership, that this man could face the inevitable coming of the end; through years of suffering and weariness, denying himself the luxury of dying that he might leave his great task so far accomplished that it can hardly fail of becoming his noblest monument in the future.

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